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Cabot: Recording error caused false arsenic result

BY LAURA LEGERE (STAFF WRITER)

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A high arsenic reading that a natural gas driller mistakenly attributed to the Montrose public water supply this week was in fact caused by a recording error when handwritten field notes were typed into the driller's database, Cabot Oil & Gas Corp. said Friday.

The sample, which actually contained none of the chemical, was taken from water drawn from Pennsylvania American Water's Lake Montrose treatment plant and trucked to Dimock Twp. in August 2010 as a replacement for well water found to have been tainted with methane from drilling operations. Test results that found no arsenic in the water were recorded properly by a Cabot contractor in the field, spokesman George Stark said Friday. But somehow the numbers for the arsenic and barium readings were switched when the data was uploaded to a computer.

The company apologized for the error.

Pennsylvania American Water asked for a review of the test data after Cabot released a statement Tuesday alleging arsenic nearly four times the federal drinking water limit originated from the utility's Montrose system - a claim the utility rebutted with six years of tests showing no evidence of arsenic in the public water.

"We are glad that Cabot reviewed their records, identified the error, and clarified this information," spokeswoman Susan Turcmanovich said. "However, we feel they should have done a more thorough analysis of the information prior to issuing such a serious allegation."

Cabot made the claim as it criticized federal regulators' interpretation of the same data.

The Environmental Protection Agency attributed the sample to a Dimock water well during its review of past water tests and the high arsenic level prompted the agency to provide replacement water to the home.

The EPA is delivering water to four homes and testing as many as 66 as it investigates potential contamination from gas drilling in a 9-square-mile area

of Dimock.

The contested arsenic result was one of two that federal toxicologists identified above drinking water limits in Dimock wells. The second, which was two-and-a-half times the drinking water limit, was not an error, Mr. Stark said, but was detected during a sampling of "very heavy solids" that came from a water well before purging it.

The water was then run through the home's treatment system and came out with no detection of arsenic, he said.

In a statement Friday, Cabot said the well water for the four homes receiving water from the EPA does not pose a health risk.

"The transcription error is an example of why a single anomalous result should not be used as the basis of a decision when a volume of data exists," the company said.

But the EPA issued a strong defense of its investigation Friday, saying that it was inspired to act both by "data items that presented sufficient health concerns" as well as a need to gather "validated data" to fill information gaps and develop a sound scientific basis for assessing the need for further action, "since much of the past data it reviewed was 'incomplete and of uncertain quality.'"

"This latest explanation by Cabot about their data further underscores the need for EPA to have reliable validated information," the agency said.

The EPA dismissed Cabot's criticism that the agency "cherry-picked" test results with the highest contamination in order to justify its probe - the agency's standard practice is to consider the highest levels to which the public may be exposed, it said - and challenged Cabot's characterization of chemicals in the Dimock water as naturally occurring.

"This is misleading," the agency said, "since although these chemicals are naturally occurring in Susquehanna County, the levels of arsenic, manganese and sodium found in the Dimock area are not consistent with background concentrations typically found in the zones from which Dimock home owners draw water for their private wells."

Cabot said Friday that it asked to meet with EPA to discuss the data before the agency began its investigation, but the EPA

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countered that Cabot began supplying it with 10,000 pages of water test results only nine days before the sampling was announced.

"Until that point, Cabot had not provided EPA any data," it said.

Cabot has since indicated it will turn over an estimated 100,000 more pages of data, the EPA said, adding that it will carefully consider both the test results and any information that the company provides to help interpret them.

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bobash 3 days ago

Well Mr. Stark we hope this teaches you to just "SHUT UP" before you embarrass yourself and your company more and let the EPA do what it knows how to do and that is protect the public health which is contrary to the NEW MISSION of the DEP who now protects industry!!!!!! We have not heard a peep from the DEP in this matter despite their criticism that the EPA had only a "Rudimentary" knowledge of the problem. I guess the data and recent revelations show who the simpletons are, Don't we Mr. Krancer!!!! Mr. Krancer why won't your PWS data base used I find it reprehensible that the DEP would blindly accept the conclusions of Cabot's very flawed conclusions based on non site specific data when the public may have been at risk. What is your agency's real MISSION???

Victoria Switzer and 9 more liked this



The_White_Rabbit 3 days ago

Once again Cabot jumped the gun as they did with the preliminary EPA memorandum. However, in this case there seems to be even more concerns on BS. The sample was taken from water from the public water supply trucked to Dimock. The Cabot reason is barium and arsenic were recorded wrong in "field notes". This makes no sense and ask any decent and competent sampler on this. The bottle for barium and arsenic are in the "SAME SAMPLE BOTTLE". Typically, arsenic, barium, chromium, mercury, and other toxic metals are in the same bottle field acidified and legal sealed then sent to lab. THE LABORATORY ANALYSIS report would have the correct concentrations. Since this was from the same bottle for both metals sent to the lab, it is not likely this was a field recording error! Did Cabot actually do a laboratory analysis to support their claim or was this just more PR BS? Someone that has even a brief experience of sampling should also comment on this.

Note that the PADEP public water supply data is available on the Internet and as stated before shows no high background metals or organics. Seems like PADEP management once agains screwed up by saying nothing on this item. Possibly they should pick competent individuals for Harrisburg positions but just former heads of the Republican party.

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